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EDUCATIONAL
TECHNOLOGYSKILLS:
CAREER PATHWAYS AND
PERCEPTIONS AMONG HARTFORD
PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

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As a computer instructor, I have seen how computer technology skills can assist individuals become more marketable in the work force. My interest in this area has led me to focus my research on what career paths have graduates from a Hartford adult education computer training program followed and do they believe the program provided them with marketable computer skills.

Non-profit organizations depend a great deal on grants, private funding and donations. The perceptions of participating students from these educational computer training programs may be a useful tool to funding committees. Funding committees are responsible for the allocation of funds to organizations. If committees hear from graduates that the program met all of their expectations, then they may consider allocating additional funding. On the other hand, if graduates voice negative comments regarding the program, then the committees may consider cutting back or totally taking away funding.

The graduates' experiences could also be used as an additional tool to evaluate the effectiveness of the computer training program. Students can provide insight of what computer skills they believe to have been beneficial and which did not. Organizations are then able to improve their program according to the responses.

Thesis

My thesis argues that although the program provided marketable computer skills, most students were still working in the same types of unskilled jobs that they had before enrolling in the program. They were faced with many social challenges and had to

overcome many hurdles such as: child care, academics, rules and regulations from State assistance programs, and the need to work while attending program.

Background

During 1989, Connecticut's economy was affected by "the national recession, defense spending cutbacks at the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of a highly-speculative real estate market, pummeled the region." (The Hartford Primer & Field Guide, p.57). As a result, Hartford's unemployment rates doubled from 5.3 percent to 10.3 percent according to The Hartford Courant (local newspaper) dated February 2, 1992. Recently, according to the Department of Labor, Hartford's unemployment rate as of September 2003 was 4.9% (<http://www.ctdol.state.ct.us/lmi/glan/glanarun.htm>). Due to the decline in the manufacturing industry, companies were unable to provide workers with stable employment and decent wages. The need to retrain displaced workers supports educational computer training programs.

The increasing dropout rates in Hartford leads to another important reason why educational computer training programs are needed. How can Hartford help dropouts become more marketable in the work force when they haven't acquired a high school diploma? Without marketable computer skills, dropouts are not able to succeed in today's job market. In order for them to become more marketable, programs like the one offered by this Hartford non-profit agency could assist them in getting back on track into the work world. According to the Strategic School Profile 1999, Hartford had a 50% dropout rate. (<http://www.state.ct.us/sde/>).

Locally, one way that can help unemployment and dropout rates is to provide people with educational computer training programs. These programs can help individuals become better prepared for the job market. In Hartford, I looked at an adult education program that “advances the social and economic conditions of the community at large, with emphasis on Hispanics through: education, training, supportive services, leadership development and advocacy. Their goal is to help individuals deal with challenges and barriers and accelerate their path towards self-sufficiency, prosperity, economic independence and personal well-being.” (This is the mission statement from the agency that is being researched. Due to confidentiality, I am unable to disclose its name.)

This organization has a variety of programs that provide individuals with educational computer training needed for the job market. I have looked at three particular programs: Youth-Business Computer Skills Training (BCST), English as a Second Language (ESL) and Basic Computer Skills and lastly, Business Computer Skills Training (BCST). The first program targets a population of 16-21 year old youth who are: 1) not participating in any educational program; 2) who do not have a high school diploma; 3) are enrolled in an adult education program, or 4) are high school graduates who are basic skills deficient, unemployed or underemployed. The curriculum focuses on computer technology skills including introduction to computers, typing, Microsoft Office Programs (Word and Excel) and provides a GED software program for participants to prepare for their GED high school exam. Students were expected to complete the program with a 26 week period. This program could be the key needed to decrease Hartford’s dropout rates. By giving this group of youth another opportunity to

become successful, not only can help lower drop out rates, but can also help the economy by providing skilled workers to the work force and lower unemployment rates at the same time.

As a part of this organization's mission statement, their emphasis is to provide services to the Hispanic population. According to the 2000 U.S. census, Hartford's "racial makeup is 27.72% White, 38.05% [African American](#), 0.54% [Native American](#), 1.62% [Asian](#), 0.11% Pacific Islander, 26.51% from other races, and 5.44% from two or more races. 40.52% of the population are [Hispanic](#) or [Latino](#) of any race." (Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia, http://en2.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hartford,_Connecticut. This page was last modified 17:47, 3 Dec 2003.). Their second program targets non-English Spanish speaking students who are in need of learning the English language. This program focuses on English skills that include conversational English, writing and grammar. In addition, the program offers a computer component. Part of the computer training skills, students are introduced to computers, taught how to use the keyboard and learned how to use Microsoft programs like Word and Excel.

With such a high Hispanic population, this organization realized the biggest barrier facing this group was the English language. In order for this group to become self-sufficient, economically independent and active citizen in the community, they needed to learn the language. By providing this opportunity, once again the organization is helping Hartford's Hispanic population become better prepared skilled workers for today's job market. This will help decrease Hartford's unemployment rates.

The third program that I look at was the Business Computer Skills Training (BCST). Participants from this program were referred by Agencies who monitored State

assistance recipients. Caseworkers would assist State assistance recipients once their aid from the State begins to expire. This program had no age limit requirements. It offered the same type of computer skills that the Youth Program and ESL/Basic Computer Skills program provided. The difference was that it did not provide a GED or ESL component. Once again, this program supports the need for educational computer training programs and can lower Hartford's unemployment and dropout rates.

Methodology

My collection of data began at the Hartford adult computer training site. I met with the case manager and showed her my IRB form. I explained to her that this was part of my Educational Studies Senior Project. It was agreed that I would use pseudonyms for the names of the individual students, staff and the site. Since I would be interviewing graduates from the program as my primary source of information, I was sure to provide the case manager with the interview questions.

As part of my interview questions, I gathered the following background information: age, high school graduate or GED recipient, where did they live, do they have children and race. There were three interview questions that reconfirmed information provided to me from the coordinator of the program: enrollment date, graduation date and program name. An additional set of questions, asked about what their work history before, during and after the program. Lastly, I asked did they believe the skills they learned helped them become more marketable in the work force.

The collection of participants were to be provided by the organization's database and were to include a variety of programs over the last five or more years.

Unfortunately, I had a setback during the collection of data stage. The organization indicated to me that they were in the process of recreating their data because their database was infected and most of their data was lost. In light of this, she was only able to provide me with the list of the most recent graduating programs. I agreed to this and told her that I would need as much contact information she was able to provide.

The staff from the Hartford Education Computer Training Program (pseudonym used for organization name) and the participants of the programs was my primary sources. I chose personal interviewing because it allowed me to observe the participants mannerisms which during the interpretation and analyzing of data. It also helped with asking additional follow up questions. The majority of the interviews took place at the participants' home. This setting provided participants with a comfortable and familiar environment. It was important because informants were willing to speak freely and shared their experiences with me with great enthusiasm. I had one phone interview. The differences were evident. The informant answered my questions with brief answers. During the interview her tone of voice gave me the sense that she did not want to provide me with any more information than she had to. Towards the end of the interviewing process, I had to rely on "snowball sampling" because it was getting harder to contact the names on my list. Snowball sampling is done by asking interviewees if they know of any one who was in the program and would they be willing to provide me with their contact information. This process was successful because I was given several additional names to contact.

Interpretation and Analysis of Primary Resources

After each interview, I transcribed the data and created an excel sheet. It outlined each question and the responses for each informant. The interpretation and analysis process began once I completed the interview phase.

The following is a breakdown of the total number of program participants and how many actual interviews were completed. As mentioned earlier, the three programs were from the most recent graduates, but because of the corrupted database had not been completely recreated. I was told that additional work had to be done from actual files and that it would be an ongoing goal for the organization.

In the most recent program of 2003, I was able to contact one third of the graduates. Forty percent of the enrolled participants were unreachable and 60% graduated. I was unable to determine the percentage of graduates for the years 2002 and 2001. In the years of 2002 and 2001 respectively, 92% and 93% of participants were unreachable. Peggy the coordinator of the program attributes this to the high level mobility of participants. This is supported by a survey conducted by the Aetna Center for Families in 2001 where they found that residents moved 2-3 times during a 3 year period. This survey targeted a 15-block area that was a high Hispanic population. This area is part of the recruiting of the programs. (Kellogg Project and Aetna Center for Families Community Resident Survey 2001, prepared by Daniel Sibirsky, Kellogg Evaluator and Carolina Castellanos, Aetna Center for Families Outreach Worker, November 2001.)

Breakdown of Program Participants				
Programs	Total Participants Enrolled	Graduates	Wrong No., Not In Service, No Answer, Moved	Actual Interviews
Youth Program (BCST)(2003)	25	15	10	5
ESL/BCST (2002)	38	Unknown	35	3
BCST (2001)	14	Unknown	13	1
Totals	77	15	58	9

Clearly from the responses of Question 7: Do you believe the skills you learned at the Hartford adult education computer training program have helped you to become more marketable in the work force, all of the participants believed that the program more marketable in the work force. Vanessa shared that “before the program I worded as a florist clerk and now I am a customer service representative at Bob’s Discount Furniture. Both my part time job and the program helped me get my job at Bob’s. The job required me to have customer service and computer skills. If I didn’t take this program I wouldn’t have gotten the job.” Abby said, “It helped a lot. I mean you look at where I’m working now at Harte Nissan as an Off-Lease Coordinator. It’s completely different to making pizza.”

Three of 9 participants currently are employed in better jobs than what they had prior to the program. I found that these 2 of 3 lived with supportive parents and 1 of 3 had relocated from Puerto Rico and arrived with a transfer from her previous job at Sam’s Club as a front-end supervisor. Six of the 9 participants were still working in the

same types of jobs: food service, retail and cleaning; they had prior to enrolling in the program. I found two distinct findings that surfaced from my data: 1) 5 of 6 participants were still working the same types of jobs were young single moms; 2) their need to work was essential for them to support their families and in addition, they were dealing with the demands of the State assistance program that only allowed them 18 months of financial assistance. This added another layer of unique challenges for these participants in comparison to the others. Destiny felt stressed because she always had a problem with child care. She said that, "I interviewed for a job at Hartford Hospital. The day I was suppose to start, my babysitter was hospitalized. This was my son's grandmother. Several months later, she died of cancer. Now I need to find someone else and I don't trust just anyone." Another participant shared, "I hate the State. They keep telling me that my financial assistance will be running out. I don't know what to do. I can't find a decent job." These participants are challenged every day with issues like these.

There was only 1 participant that was still unemployed. Her mom was present during the interview and commented, "She just doesn't want to do anything. She needs to go back to school or get out there and start looking for a job." Ashley asked if I knew of any other programs that she might enroll in. I share with her several names of local agencies that might be able to help her. The Jubilee House provides the Esperanza Program. This program helps women enroll in college. It prepares them with some of the academic challenges that students encounter while transitioning into school. Based on comments from previous students, The Esperanza Program added a computer technology component to their program. Students who are attending college have come back to the program and said that they wished they had more computer skills. The

program now refers student to the Trinfo Café, a community technology center, to enroll in computer workshops. I also referred her to the Urban League. This is another non-profit organization that provides educational computer training.

Future Research Ideas

From the data that has been collected, additional research questions could be pursued. The perceptions of participating students show that they believe the Hartford adult education computer training program provided them with marketable computer skills. As I have pointed out, students are faced with many social challenges. Further research could be looked at by asking questions such as: what are the social barriers/challenges that students cope with while attending this type of program? How do these challenges affect their performance?

If additional time was given, I would continue this research by taking a closer look at the lives of students. I would suggest that each student be assigned an individual mentor. This personal mentor could assist students with resolving some of the social challenges they face while participating in this type of a program. This mentoring component to the program could help the organization evaluate the effectiveness of the program, in addition to providing personal support for the students. The perception of mentors could provide possible suggestions on how to better keep students motivated, keep them enrolled and provide ongoing services after graduation. In my opinion, this will help students successfully complete the program and provide them with the confidence they need to secure meaningful employment.

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